Compassion, Science And Consciousness Survival

by Charles Tart

A friend of mine died recently, and being with him during his last few months taught me a lot about care for the dying, and how I might integrate my scientific work on survival of consciousness with a compassionately human perspective. It is all too easy to use the abstractions and intellectual creations of science as a means of distracting ourselves from the fact of death. It confronts us all, and we all have a natural fear of annihilation and of the unknown. Yet by avoiding the actuality of death, taking ourselves away from the presence of mortality, we also shut out an opportunity for a profound and valuable experience-an experience that may transform the quality of our living.

The Honesty of Death

Before turning to a scientific perspective, therefore, I want to begin with the story of my recent experience with my friend Ken. I first met him a couple of years ago through our common interest in Buddhism. Although we were both members of Sogyal Rinpoche's Rigpa Fellowship, he was not someone I knew intimately. Last year he fell ill with AIDS-related symptoms. When he could not take care of himself anymore, I, along with a number of others, volunteered to come to is home occasionally and do what we could do to offer practical help and spiritual support.

I've had very little experience in caring for the dying-even though intellectually I know quiet a lot about the process. My first reaction was "What am I going to say to someone who is dying?" All my conceptual knowledge about the biology and psychology of death and dying seemed so inappropriate when confronted with the real thing. The first evening I went over to see Ken, however, the confusion I had about what I do vanished because something very simple. He immediately asked me to help him with his will because He was having trouble seeing clearly and he couldn't read the document. He wanted me to read it to him, take notes and make corrections as he dictated. Somehow, his matter-of-fact acceptance of his fate, the imminence of his death, dissolved my awkwardness. I found I could unselfconsciously talk to him about the fact that he was dying. It wasn't a big deal anymore. That initial moment of honestly simply cleared the air. The experience, however, also sensitized me to how dishonest we are about death in our culture, about how much we tend to avoid and suppress it.

I would visit Ken about one evening a week, first at his home and then in the hospice. My interactions with him there led me to an even deeper appreciation of insight into the power and possibilities available if we can open up to the process of dying. Ken had not been a student of Buddhism very long. perhaps three or four years, but he had become very serious about it. He intended to die in a Tibetan Buddhist way: Taking death as an opportunity for spiritual growth, as a way to dedicate his suffering to relieve the suffering of others, to develop compassion and to sue the process of dying to gain greater liberation.

His room was arranged to evoke this atmosphere. He had pictures on the wall of Buddhist teachers he had known, and a little shrine at the foot of his bed where he could see it easily. People would come in from the Rigpa Fellowship and they would help him chant mantras or go through some prayers, meditate with him, or talk about spiritual matters. When he began slipping into what the medical staff called AIDS "dementia," where his mind would wander, the focused chanting, praying and meditation were very helpful in keeping his communicative. Of course, people could not be with him all the time, so I helped out by recording on tape some of the chants and practices he was familiar with from Tibetan Buddhism, including English translators, which he could play over and over. He found that very helpful, and I realized then how important audiotapes could be in assisting people through the dying process.

Dying As An Altered State

I learned a great deal from being with Ken. For one thing, I learned that what the doctors were calling "dementia," implying some form of stupidity or loss of coherent consciousness, could be something altogether different. From my perspective of years studying spiritual practices and transpersonal psychologies, it was clear that he was going in and out of altered states of consciousness. Sometimes he was right here in his ordinary state; he was sharp and had a great sense of humor. And sometimes he was way "out there," to us he was sleeping or unconscious, but when talking to him afterwards he would report that he had been very aware and experiencing some very extraordinary conscious states. Sometimes he was kind of here and kind of there, in an altered state, and it was difficult to communicate with him unless we were careful about how we phrased things. I realized that this was like

talking to someone undergoing a psychedelic experience or who is delirious from a fever. We can communicate a lot, both ways, if we allow for the characteristics of the altered state and we know something about doing that.

As I said, Ken was highly motivated to take his dying as an opportunity for practicing his spiritual path more and more deeply. For instance, he repeatedly asked the hospice staff to turn off the television, and the set was always on. The basic policy seemed to be drug people up and distract them with a n unending round of sitcoms. The hospice was giving good medical care, but except in Ken's room, there was no recognition of the spiritual possibilities connected with death.

Soon enough, however, the hospice staff began to notice what was going on, and they began dropping in to Ken's room whenever they had a break, because of the calm and the spiritual loving atmosphere there. They noticed there was a meaningful process going on in his room, a different response to dying that the usual attitude "all we can do is make the patients comfortable."

I wasn't there at the very end. Ken wanted to share his last moments just with his family and Sidney, a remarkable lady for the Rigpa Fellowship who had been Ken's most devoted helper. But I was told the remarkable story of how he left. He knew his time was close, and he chose to listen to a tape of a Tibetan Buddhist practice called "Powa," a mediation designed to eject consciousness form the body in a way that is favorable to liberation or at least to the probability of a good incarnation. Powa usually involves internally reciting mantras and visualizing energy flows, in a meditative from of mind.

Ken died while listening to the powa practice, breathing shallower and shallower, until the last round of the visualization he breathed out and didn't breathe in again. He died with a smile on his face, and people said that his body was radiant for hours afterwards. It was like a mystical experience. Yet this wasn't somebody who had been an advanced spiritual master; it wasn't as though he had been raised somewhere like Tibet and had lived his life immersed in exotic spiritual practices. He was an ordinary modern American, sharp and computer-literate, an analytical kind of guy. He had just opened himself up to Buddhist practices for a few years, and at the end had committed himself wholly to the spiritual possibilities of dying.

Improving How We Can Die

The experienced of being with Ken inspired me to want to be more helpful to the dying. At first I though- and often still do- "Who am I to think I can help the dying?" I'm not somebody with extensive hospice training and I don't have the practical experience. On the other hand, I started thinking it doesn't take much at all to make an improvement on the mainstream practice of "drug'em and distract'em with old re-runs!" I feel ignorant about so much; but I do know something about altered states which people are going to experience as they die; and I do know something about spiritual practices concerned with dying and death.

Sogyal Rinpoche's best selling book, The *Tibetan Book* of *Living and Dying*, has altered many people to the need for a more spiritual death, and I hope to be of some help in his plans to form a hospice designed to offer more comprehensive spiritual care for the dying. Although it will be organized within a Buddhist context, he will attempt to generalize it so that people unfamiliar with Buddhism will feel welcomed, without having to adopt a different spiritual philosophy.

There are other ways I can be of help to the dying. As it happened, while taking care of Ken I heard from an old friend, Robert Monroe –founder of the Monroe Institute and author of Journeys *Out of the Body* – and he, "coincidentally," had been thinking of developing techniques to help the dying, with no specific religious framework at all.

I've been working for some time now with Bob Monroe and Elisabeth Kubler-Ross to develop a series of training tapes for people who are dying. This series of cassettes uses Monroe's "Hemi-Sync" process of driving brainwaves via special sounds to induce states of consciousness that will assist in making the suggestions and ideas on the tape more effective. The sequence starts with instructions designed to help people relax, to sleep better, and to have clearer inner experiences which remind them that we are more than our physical bodies- that there is a life of the mind, and inner life, that's very important and that doesn't seem particularly connected to the body. Eventually, some of these exercises are designed to produce what we may call "out-of-body" experiences or "inner journeys." The altered states induced by listening to these tapes are intended as a preparation for death by giving the person a sense of what it would be like to be a consciousness that is not confined to the body. Finally, when the person feels that he or she is ready to go, there will be one tape which takes the listener through the now familiar methods of "leaving," but this time with no return instructions on the tape.
(They can always change their mind, of course, and come back o their own.)

In focusing here on the purpose of this "Going Home" series, I am deliberately emphasizing the human side of dying, rather then the science. The tapes are an experiment in improving the quality of the way a person can die. At the very least, they will give people something far more interesting to occupy the final stages of a terminal illness than watching television.

Scientific Research on Survival

Switching now from my hear to my head, I'd like to summarize my scientific perspective on the question of consciousness survival. For most of my career as a scientist it has been obvious to me that the dominant materialistic view of consciousness as nothing but the electrochemical operation of the brain is grossly inadequate-not just on theoretical or philosophical grounds, but in light of the solid, factual evidence. There are tow bodies of data that support this position: 1) the data on psi phenomena-extrasensory perception (ESP) and psychokinesis (PK); and 2) careful research with mediums.

(i) Psi Research

The evidence from parapsychology shows that you can put human beings in situations where, according to the dominant materialist view of the world, no communication can possibly happen and they cannot affect external physical processes. Nevertheless, it can be shown that people sometime do communicate with each other when all known sensory channels have been excluded (ESP), and can influence the behavior of physical systems without any people in isolated rooms, separated even by thousands of miles, have tested to see they could send telepathic messages, and have found that sometimes a message gets through (see sidebar)

In other experiments, researcher tested to see if people could affect an electronic device simply by using their minds, and discovered that the behavior of the machine correlated with the intention of the subject significantly above the statistical laws of chance. In one type of experiment, for example, the subjects were asked to influence a sequence of randomly flashing red and green lights, and demonstrated a ability to produce a statistical bias in favor of one of the colors. In other words, we have here an instance of mind directly affecting matter. (Now, of course, this happens every time you or I exercise our volition – for example, deciding to turn a page or switch off a light. But that is mind affecting the matter of its own brain, nervous system and muscles which are in physical contact with h page or switch. In the situation just referred to, however, we have an instance of someone's mind directly affecting matter beyond that person's brain and body. Both of these situation – mind affecting its own brain, and mind affecting matter at a distance –remain completely inexplicable within the parameters of modern science.) Although such phenomena are typically dismissed as "trivial" or "inconsequential anomalies" by the scientific orthodoxy, the evidence for both telepathy and pychokinesis explodes the myth of reductionistic-physicalist science that mind or consciousness is "nothing but" an epiphenomenona of the brain.

These results present a far greater challenge to current scientific paradigms than anything that has come out of relativity theory or quantum physics. In short, they effectively demonstrate the non-physical nature of consciousness. Mind does not equal brain. Even if we don't have a coherent theoretical framework for explaining this, the empirical evidence removes previous objections based solely on theoretical physicalist grounds. Given this, the exploration of survival of consciousness after biological death becomes a viable scientific venture.

None of the evidence for the phenomenon reported in the more than one thousand articles on psi effects can be explained in terms of what a human brain and nervous system can do. You don't have to be a physicist to see that the energies are not there in the brain to communicate the ESP information or the PK effects over distances. If you believe you fully understand what a human being is, and it's all a function of material factors we know about, you are ignoring the very reliable data that tells us the mind can do things that the brain can't do. The mind can reach out and gather information and affect things when there is no way to explain this according to our current understanding of physics or any reasonably straight forward extension of it. Diehard materialists object that someday scientist may be able to explain mind and in physical terms; but that is simply a case of what philosophers call "promissory materialism." Such a position is completely unscientific; there is no way ever to falsify a statement of promissory materialism. It is a statement of faith, on a par with saying that someday we'll be able to explain everything in terms of what God or the angels do.

Based on the evidence from parapsychology, we can make a strong case, then, for believing that the human mind is something more than the body. IN principle, therefore, the idea that consciousness could survive death is not so outrageous, and should not be beyond scientific exploration. Nevertheless, we may ask: "What, specifically, can science contribute to our understanding in this area?"

(ii) Research With Mediums

To begin with, scientists could take note of reports of anomalous phenomena involving purported extra-corporeal consciousness. For instance, many people have reported seeing apparitions of the dead, or believe they have ad psychic contact with deceased relatives. Such spontaneous experiences, however, provide inadequate data on which to build science deals with an experimental method and requires stronger evidence than anecdotes.

Attempts to establish experimental evidence for disembodied consciousness began in the last century with the rise of modern spiritualism. The early

Spiritualists emphasized that it wasn't necessary to believe in survival in order to investigate the apparitions. In fast, they discouraged unquestioning belief, inviting instead all serious-minded folk to "Test if for yourself." In principle, that sentiment reflects the essence of the scientific attitude. Of course, in attempting to actually apply this approach, investigators encountered many difficult procedural complications – such as how to rule out trickery, collusion, and self-delusion.

Even if the medium were honest, but in an altered state, she may not even know if she got information through the client and replayed it as part of an unconscious impersonation of the deceased subject. Scientific investigation of good mediums involves, ideally, sending a proxy instead of someone emotionally attached to –or, indeed, even someone who knows the deceased. A proxy could not inadvertently give away part of the information being sought.

To be good science, of course, the entire interaction should be recorded-nowadays, on videotape if possible. Other clues, such as body language for instance, may give the game away. A well-recorded session could help eliminate this artifact.

A fair amount of good quality research has been done in this manner in the past – before videotapes. Some years ago I looked at the data in great detail, and my main impression was that in some cases there is extremely good evidence for the survival of a particular personality. The alleged deceased communicator gave correct names, dates, and specific personality characteristics which created a distinct impression of the deceased's identity.

To give a sense of the standards of investigation used in much of this research, I sometimes use an analogy: Suppose a favorite cousin disappeared a few years ago, and out of the blue you get a long-distance phone call. The connection is very bad, it's hard to make out voice tone or complete sentences, and the caller, claiming to be your cousin, says he was not hit on the head so he has a hard time remembering; and now he needs urgent financial help. Naturally, you would want to be sure who the person is before you sent any money. The kinds of rational criteria which would need to be applied in this scenario have been applied in the cases of good mediumship that have been investigated in the past.

Spiritual Implications of Conscious Dying

At this point, I'd like to bring the article to a focus by integrating the opening section illustrating a human perspective on death with the scientific discussion above. Together, they may help shed some light on the spiritual implications inherent in the altered states experienced during the process of dying.

The central question of many spiritual traditions is "Who am I? What is my identity?" All my studies, and my researchers of other people's studies, have made me think that a major component of one's identity is the physical body. Our awareness is dominated for the most part by the physical representation of who we are. There is a constant pattern of sensations from our body that we are not even conscious of for the most part, but which nevertheless molds our consciousness, which in turn reinforces habits of thinking, perceiving and acting. Unfortunately, from a spiritual or psychology of liberation perspective, this is a problem.

More and more it becomes apparent to me as a psychologist and spiritual student that each of us has vast potentials. Quite apart from questions of survival we have enormous potential to crate our identity, our experience of self. But because we are socialized, encultured into a particular set of beliefs and behaviors, each one of us has been squeezed down to a tiny fraction of that potential. The greatest tragedy is that we have been led to believe that tiny fraction is all we are. We live, therefore, in a cramped psychological space, in what Gurdjieff called a "false personality." WE think that is who we are, we think that our personality; but it is false in the sense that it ignores so much of the reality of what could be.

A major spiritual task in life is to begin to realize how artificially cramped we are, to stop identifying so closely with that limited self, and begin to discover some of our other potentials. The task is to live what I like to call a more "spacious" life. According to Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the best way to prepare for death is to become more spacious in life now, to begin to relax, to become more natural, to get out of this artificial identification with our limited self. Becoming more spacious gives us opportunities to contact the more open, deeper, broader parts of our self. A classical Buddhist, or course, would say letting go allows you to enter a state of "no-self." The concept of "self" tends to concretize and promote too much identification with the pathological habits of what has no permanent existence anyways.

This letting go of self is, I think, a wonderful way to prepare for death. To the extent that I can stop identifying with the limited self and false personality of Professor Tart – the more I experience such spaciousness – the less of a shock, I believe death is going to be. What excites me about Tibetan Buddhism and working with the dying is the chance to contact basic spiritual realities that make death an opportunity to grow, to expand, to be of help to other people.

Who Survives?

Taken together, although not overwhelmingly convincing, the evidence from psi research and the

quality of communications from some mediums persuades me of the possibility that consciousness can exist independently of a physical body. I can sum up my position on this as follows: I will not be too surprised if, after some initial shock, suffering and maybe unconsciousness during my own death, I regain consciousness. But I will be surprised if "I" regain consciousness.

Let me explain this apparent contradiction. The "I" that I am mostly familiar with, the one identified with the personality that most of my friends and acquaintances know me by, is shaped to a great extent by information from my physical senses. My awareness is informed by external signals coming through my exteroceptors (sight, hearing, touch, smelling, tasting), and by signals from within my body (my interceptors). If most of this sensory information is shut out or greatly reduced- for example, as would happen in a sensory deprivation tank-I cold experience a different state of awareness. Take away my access to sensory information completely, as will happen when I die, then it is inevitable that whatever consciousness remains will be shifted into an altered state significantly different from my normal waking consciousness. That is what I mean when I say that I would be surprised if, after death, "I" regain consciousness.

As I watched my friend Ken slip in and out of altered states in his final days, and witnessed how different he was at times from the man I had known, I could only wonder about his state of consciousness after he serenely left his body behind, graced with that radiant smile. Would it even matter to him, now, in a radically altered state, whether his friends and family could communicate across the dimensions? Would he see any relevance, significance or value in our philosophical, scientific or even spiritual attempts to decide, once and for all, the issues of an afterlife? And if "he" could communicate, would his experiences have any recognizable meaning for us?

Such, after all, may be concerns only of the living.

And yet…in some ways beyond our understanding, we, our ordinary selves, seem to survive. As account after account from those who have died and have bee revived testify, the near-death experience often meets the spirits of deceased loved ones-meets them in profound and loving ways. Recognition is sure and deep and joyous. So we change, I think we must change after death, but yet something essential, something vital persists. I advocate that we investigate death and survival as much as possible, but perhaps there are limits to what we can understand with our ordinary mind…

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Notes and References

1. The Going Home tape series, designed by Robert Monroe with assistance from Charles Tart and Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, will be available in the first quarter of 1994, through the Monroe Institute, Box 175, Faber, VA 22938
2. For example, see Robert Jahn and Brenda Dunne, Margins of Reality (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovick, 1987); and Rusell Targ and Harold Puthoff, Mind-Reach (Delacorte Press, 1977), available from the IONS books service (see page 45 for ordering information).
3. C.T. Tart. "Information Transmission Rates in Forced-Choice ESP Experiments: Precognition Does not Work as well as Present-Time ESP", Journal of the American Society for Physical Research, 77 (1984). Pp. 293-310
4. C.T.Tart "Laboratory PK: Frequency of Manifestation and Resemblance to Precognition", Research in Parapsychology 1892 (Scarecrow Press, 1983), pp 101-102.
5. More discussions of and practical techniques for creating this kind of spaciousness are discussed in Charles Tart's Waking Up: Overcoming the Obstacles to Human Potential (New Science Library, 1986), available from the IONS book service (see page 45 for ordering information).

Mind Does Not Equal Brain

The findings of scientific parapsychology – a collection of thousands of naturalistic observations and more than 1,000 laboratory experiments in the last seven decades-demonstrate (conclusively to my mind) that there are aspects of the human mind that simply cannot be reduced to materialistic explanations. Thus the equation "Mind=Brain" is woefully incomplete, and should not be used to rule out spiritual realities or the possibility of survival a priori.

Briefly, Para psychological research has firmly demonstrated the existence of four major psychic abilities "Psychic" means that while we observe information transfers or physical effects on the physical world, there are no reasonably conceivable physical means whereby the information transfer or physical effects can have come about. There may be other psychic abilities-I think there are-but they have not been investigated and established to the degree that these four have, so I focus on them as the foundations of parapsychology. The four are telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and psycho kinesis.

Telepathy is the transmission of information from mind to mind, after we have ruled out ordinary physical means like talking to one another or sign language, and ruled our inference from physically know data. The laboratory studies that firmly established telepathy were mostly card guessing studies. A sender isolated in his or her own room, looked at one card after another from a thoroughly shuffled pack of cards, trying to send his or her thoughts. A receiver isolated in another room wrote down his impressions of the cards. Perfect scores are extremely rare, but enough studies showed more hits than could be reasonably expected by chance to establish telepathy.

Clairvoyance is the direct extrasensory perception of information about the physical world, without the intervention of another mind which already know the information by ordinary sensory means. The classical card test studies involved a percipient giving impressions of the order of a deck of randomized cards when no living human knew what the order of the deck was. Many studies showed enough hits to establish clairvoyance. The information transmissions rate is about the same as in telepathy studies. Both telepathy and clairvoyance seem unaffected by physical factors like spatial distance or physical shielding.

Precognition is the prediction of the future when the future is determined in a random way, such that inference from present knowledge would not be helpful. The classic experimental design is to ask a percipient to predict the order of a target deck of cards,

but the cards will be randomly shuffled at some future date. Precognition of this sort has been successful at intervals of up to a year. Curiously the average information transfers rate is much lower than in present-time telepathy or clairvoyance studies.

Collectively, telepathy, clairvoyance and precognition are known as extrasensory perception (ESP), as they all involve information gathering.

Psychokinesis (PK) is the fourth well-established psychic phenomenon. It is popularly called "mind over matter." Classic test involved wishing or willing which way machine thrown dice would turn up, although the target object us now usually an electronic random number generator. The frequency of PK appearance is about the same as precognition.

The importance of these psi phenomena, as the four are now collectively referred to, is that they are manifestations of mind that have resisted all attempts to reduce them to known physical forces, or straightforward extensions of known physical forces. I exempt some of the speculations on the frontiers of quantum physics to explain psi as "straightforward" extensions of physics. These ideas are controversial even in physics perse. They involve such a radically different view of what is "physical" that they should not be lumped in with the old materialistic physics, and quite important from a scientific view, have not shown any notable degree of success in our understanding and controlling psi phenomena. The psi phenomena are examples where we must say: Mind does not equal brain.

Certainly some aspects of mind and consciousness are partially or wholly based in brain and nervous system functioning, but psi phenomena are not, and so openly demonstrate the need to investigate mind on it's own terms. These psi phenomena do not "prove" survival, but insofar as mind has aspects which do not seem limited by space or time, such aspects of mind are the sort we might expect to survive bodily death.

-C.T.